RADIOHEAD

Subterranean homesick aliens

How five bookish Middle Englanders became the world's most vital band

Text: Stephen Dalton Illustration: Rob Biddulph

JACK'S BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS:

STARTING 1ST OF THE MONTH, 7PM TILL LATE.

(LATE SEPTEMBER THAT IS.)

They are the world's most unlikely rock megastars, small-town bookworms with a squirming revulsion for the mechanics of fame and the complacent careerism of their say-nothing peers. And yet, ten years after their first singles were slated and celebrated in the pages of *NME*, Radiohead remain one of the world's most provocative, passionate and progressive bands. No other British group inspires such violent extremes of love and hatred, from *NMEmail* to the caustic comments of platinum-selling rivals.

Last week the Oxford quintet returned to the road in Europe, airing top-secret new songs from their sixth studio album. Until the band took the stage, nobody knew how they would sound. Would Radiohead 2002 be space jazz or avant-noise opera? Would Thom Yorke slash his wrists or launch a poisonous attack on the media, Tony Blair and global capitalism? Would Jonny Greenwood torch his guitar in a grand final ritual of post-rock subversion?

Only one thing is clear. Radiohead remain a hard act to top, a potent evolutionary force cleaning the scum from rock's stagnant gene pool. And even a decade on, who among the current crop of retro-hipsters and brittle copycats has even a fraction of the guts and brains to knock Thom off his art-punk battlements? Even if you hate the 'Head, can you really deny that 21st century music urgently needs them? On these pages we retrace their long journey from provincial misfits to the world's most vital band in 2002.

OXFORD BLUES

Oxford is not a rock'n'roll town. Leafy and literary, it is an island of history, heritage and highbrow culture. The sort of collegiate backwater that future rock gods escape from, change their accents, cover their tracks and never return. But not Radiohead – they stayed in Oxford, and used it as unlikely rocket fuel for their blowtorch anthems of small-town self-loathing, sexual nausea and cathartic rage.

It is perhaps significant that Radiohead still keep their permanent homes in Oxford, a short but symbolic distance from London and its media-saturated hotspots. This sedate Middle England city remains a living map of the band's landmark early years, right back to the music room at posh Abingdon School where they met and shared their illicit passion for Joy Division, The Smiths and the Pixies. Then came the shared semi on Ridgefield Road where the unsigned quintet conducted their shambolic early rehearsals on Fridays – hence their early name, On A Friday.

A short walk away lies the Jericho Tavern, where On A Friday's incendiary shows over the summer of 1991 helped secure a management contract and a record deal. And it was back to Oxford that the band returned to celebrate after signing with EMI in December that year. Alas, the heavens opened and the band managed to lose each other in town. "It was a typical Radiohead day," says Colin Greenwood.

Just outside Oxford, in the sleepy hamlet of Sutton Courtenay, is the Courtyard studio complex run by the band's managers Chris Hufford and Bryce Edge. It was here that most of their debut album, 'Pablo Honey', was recorded. Most significant was 'Creep', a lacerating anthem of self-loathing inspired by an untouchable beauty Thom knew on Oxford's social scene, which went on to become a Top Ten UK single and a massive global hit. On its second release, in September 1993, *NME* hailed a landmark tune with "clout, class and truth proudly branded on its forearm".

'Creep' made Radiohead into global rock icons, but also potential one-hit wonders. In early 1994, Thom Yorke and his girlfriend Rachel moved into a detached house in the Oxford suburb of Headington. The singer christened his new home "the house that 'Creep' built".

Radiohead could still have been Oxford boys made good after 'Creep' and 'Pablo Honey'. In September 1994, *NME* wondered: "Will Radiohead ever, ever, ever do anything one tenth as insanely wonderful as 'Creep' again?" Meanwhile, Thom grew to despise the song which had made him a Kurt-style icon of self-hatred, rechristening it 'Crap'. Even today, he rarely discusses or performs it.

But he made an exception for the hometown crowd at Radiohead's South Park mega-show last summer, just a stone's throw away from the modest house he bought seven years before, fearing his rock career was over. As ever, Oxford showered hysterical applause on their unlikely local heroes.

MARTYRDOM AND MADNESS

Melancholy and gloomy intensity have long been Radiohead hallmarks, but Thom Yorke was incensed when the band's doom-laden second album saw him held up in some quarters as a potential rock'n'roll martyr to rival Kurt Cobain and Richey Manic. As Craig Nicholls is discovering, suicide is never really an attractive long-term career option.

Recorded in between bust-ups and breakdowns, with their American record label on the verge of dropping the band, 'The Bends' was a monumental slab of luminous modernist rock miles ahead of the gristly Brit-grunge of 'Pablo Honey'. Released in March '95, *NME* gave the album 9/10, branding it "the consummate, all-encompassing, continent-straddling '90s rock record".

But, as with Cobain, Thom's bilious lyrics became increasingly fixated on illness and nausea, and his onstage behaviour began to reflect this sickly state. Before playing London's Astoria in May '94, the singer told *NME*: "I'm fucking ill and physically I'm completely fucked and mentally I've had enough."

A prestigious summer tour in 1995 supporting REM showed Radiohead a more positive way to deal with fame. Meeting Michael Stipe, Yorke says, taught him that "it is possible to do more than two albums, and to like the idea of sticking around. Learning to forget how you did something and not trying to compete with yourself. It's a cool thing, just learning to not have to fight and argue with yourself all the time."

But, despite all of Thom's coping mechanisms, depression continues to dog him today. "It's not particularly destructive, it's not particularly bad," he told *NME* last year. "Lots of people are much worse – lots of people can't leave the house. They've got no idea why, maybe they never will find out why. The drugs they get given don't work, and all the therapy is completely pointless."

Even the most recent Radiohead albums, 'Kid A' and 'Amnesiac', were recorded between bouts of hallucination and paranoia. But don't mistake Yorke for a sacrificial victim. "A lot of creative people hear voices, a lot of creative people have crazy thoughts, a lot of creative people want to jump off bridges," he argues. "So fucking what...?"

PARANOID ANDROIDS

Right from their beginnings, Radiohead have enjoyed fractious relations with the music press.

Even if you hate the 'Head, can you really deny that 21st century music urgently needs them?

EVERYTHING IN ITS RIGHT PLACE

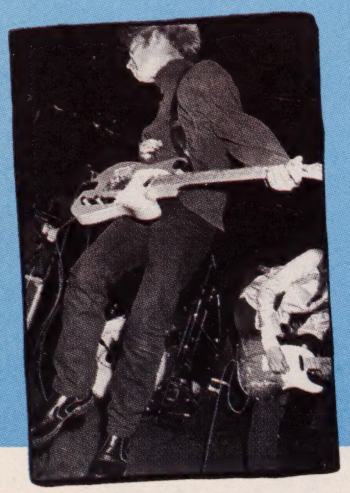
TEN KEY RADIOHEAD GIGS

1 The Venue, Oxford, February 1992

Performing as On A Friday in what would later become The Zodiac, they receive their first plaudits from *NME*, which declares that they display "astonishing intensity".
Key song: 'Stop Whispering'

2 Oxford South Park, July 7, 2001

The band host a festival in their own backyard. *NME* describes Radiohead as "godlike" despite the thrashing rain during an encore of 'Creep'. Beck, Sigur Rós, Supergrass and Humphrey Lyttleton are also along for the brilliant ride.
Key song: 'Pyramid Song'



3 Glastonbury, June 28, 1997

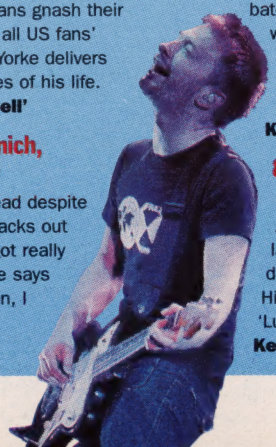
The moment that proves what *NME* has long suspected – that they are destined to be the biggest band in the world. Furthermore, they make 100,000 people forget they are in the most miserable, mud-sodden place on Earth.
Key song: 'Paranoid Android' (*"rain down"*, indeed)

4 Roseland Ballroom, New York, October 11, 2000

Inspiring the biggest ever influx of emails to *NME*, as ticketless fans gnash their teeth, this show fulfills all US fans' expectations as Thom Yorke delivers one of the performances of his life.
Key song: 'Morning Bell'

5 Riem Airport, Munich, November 25, 1995

A show which goes ahead despite Thom's ill health; he blacks out during 'Creep'. "I just got really fucking freaked out," he says later. "I got tunnel vision, I threw stuff around and ended up with blood all over my face. I cried for two hours afterwards."
Key song: 'Creep'



6 Theatre Antique, Arles, June 13, 2000

From the site of an ancient Roman amphitheatre they unveil the songs that will become 'Kid A' and 'Amnesiac'. *NME.COM* says: "The new songs suggest that the forthcoming album will be nothing short of magnificent."
Key song: 'Knives Out'

7 Milton Keynes Bowl (supporting REM), July 30, 1995

Here, it could be argued, is where the baton of greatest rock band in the world is passed to Yorke from Stipe, who as early as 1993 had declared: "Radiohead are so good they scare me."
Key song: 'Just'

8 T In The Park, July 13, 1996

A faultless performance at their last UK show before they disappear to record 'OK Computer'. Hinting at the greatness to follow, 'Lucky' reduces grown men to tears.
Key song: 'Lucky'

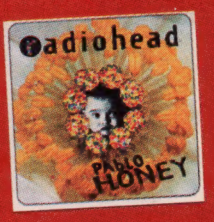
9 The Astoria, London, September 3, 1997

A fan club-only show which serves to highlight the astonishing number of B-sides that *should* be on an album. From 'Banana Co' through to 'Maquilladora', it underlines that Radiohead are unrivalled in the quality of their single releases.
Key song: 'Talk Show Host'

10 BBC Television Centre, London, June 9, 2001

The *Later With Jools Holland* special that launches 'Amnesiac' and includes (sadly never to be broadcast) a stunning interpretation of Neil Young's 'Cinnamon Girl', so rocking that it underlines the new-found love of guitars.
Key song: 'Cinnamon Girl'

'HEAD MUSIC



'PABLO HONEY' (1993)
Twenty years of pre-fame existence rush-recorded into an uneven grunge-rock debut with overly polished production. Plenty of pent-up potential but few real anthems besides 'Creep'. **6/10**

'THE BENDS' (1995)
Radiohead find their voice on this slow-burning collection of doomy lullabies and heavily treated guitars, including complaint-rock classics 'Fake Plastic Trees' and 'Street Spirit (Fade Out)'. Initially shunned by America but spawned five Top 30 hits in Britain. **8/10**

'OK COMPUTER' (1997)
A symphony of travel sickness and millennial nausea fusing trip-hop rhythms, Gregorian chants, processed guitar shimmers and barely a duff note. Showered with acclaim and awards, it contains shimmering cosmic beauties 'Karma Police' and 'No Surprises'. **10/10**

'KID A' (2000)
Moves beyond the architectural majesty of 'OK Computer' into a sci-fi netherworld of Aphex-oid drones, psychedelic textures and fractal rhythms. Baffles some old-school fans, but radically reinvents Radiohead for the new millennium. **7/10**

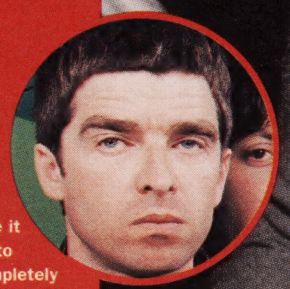
'AMNESIAC' (2001)
A companion piece to 'Kid A' recorded over the same period, 'Amnesiac' adds slightly more melodic elements to the hermetically sealed alienation of its predecessor. Spectral and unsettling, but incorporating Smiths-ian guitar ballads and even a dash of Dixieland jazz. **8/10**

YOU AND WHOSE ARMY?

Radiohead's Famous Friends And Foes

"It does bite a bit when I hear rumours that Radiohead release an album but they've got an album of songs on the back burner just in case this one doesn't work out! That says to me they think they can do whatever the fuck they want because they think they can sell it! Put them in a room with a guitar and one lightbulb and fucking entertain me. It's not about fucking production – that's not fucking music, that's about technicians."
Kelly Jones, Stereophonics

"Radiohead are the best band in the history of rock."
Jack Black, Tenacious D



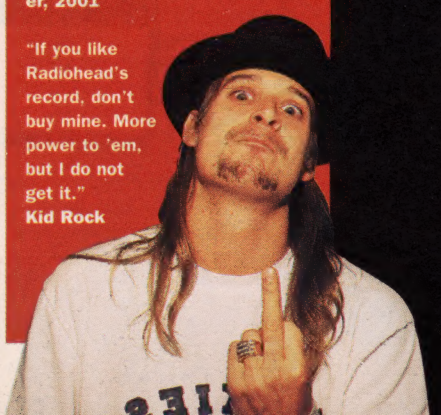
"Hey, the ice age is *not* coming. You fucking miserable c—t."
Noel Gallagher, Oasis

"When I heard Radiohead's 'Kid A' I was so stoked. For people all over the place it was the coolest record to come out forever. It completely blew away people's expectation. A lot of people weren't into it, they were like, 'What the hell is this, there are no guitars.' But when you keep listening to it you're like, 'These guys are on to something, they're moving in their own direction.'"
Brandon Boyd, Incubus

"They exist, that's my opinion of them."
Brett Anderson, Suede

"I don't like them. I heard five or six tracks and I thought they sounded really obvious and cheesy. I mean, I'm just comparing it to my favourite music and I think it's terrible compared to that, but compared to all the shit boring R&B it's probably alright. Compared to those teen punk sort of bands, they are probably amazing. If you're only exposed to that kind of stuff and then Radiohead come along you will probably think that they are geniuses."
Aphex Twin

"1. Radiohead – 'Kid A'"
Michael Jackson lists his favourite albums of, er, 2001



"If you like Radiohead's record, don't buy mine. More power to 'em, but I do not get it."
Kid Rock

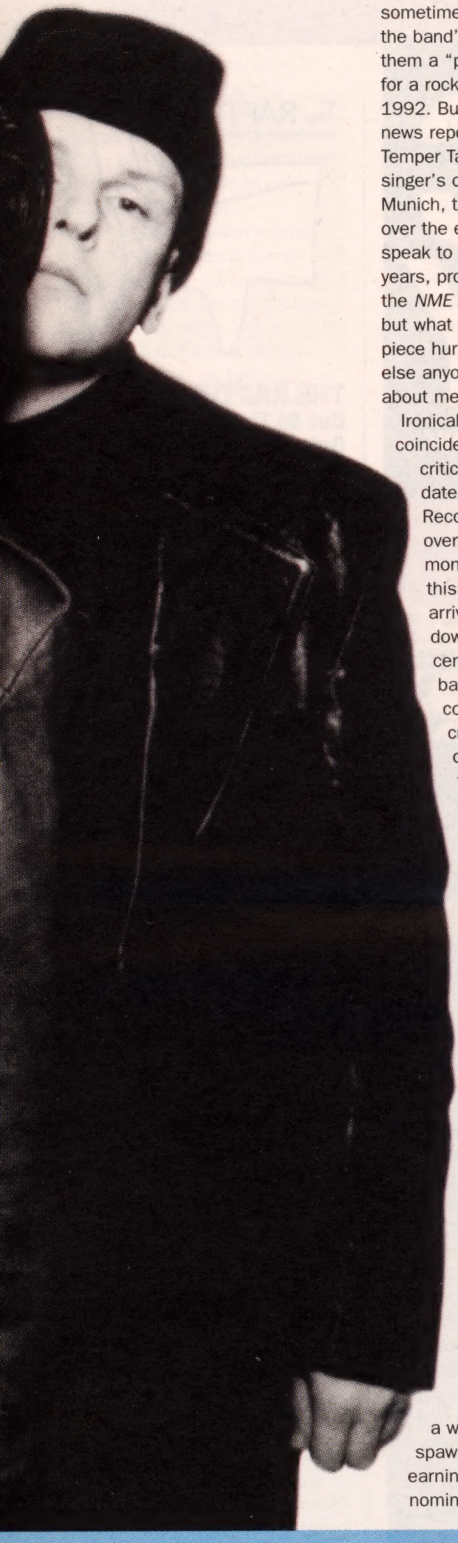
FOLLOW ME

Five New Radioheads Rated

TRAVIS
Dubbed by *NME*'s own Sylvia Patterson as "bairns' Radiohead", the Scotpop supergroup take the atmospherics and chiming guitars of "classic" Radiohead with them along the low road to instantly palatable, jingly-jangly chart success. Also employed the 'Head's regular producer Nigel Godrich on their last two albums.
'HEAD RATING: 5/10

COLDPLAY
The shimmering, sonorous laments of monkish balladeer Chris Martin recall the more serene moments on 'The Bends'

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARTYN GOODACRE/SANTO BASONE/TOM SHEEHAN/STEVE GILLET/IAN JENNINGS/LFI



This type of on-off vendetta often comes about because most big bands are surrounded by salaried sycophants whose jobs depend on keeping their paymasters happy. The frank opinions of free-thinking journalists can come as a nasty shock.

In fairness, *NME* was sometimes mercilessly scathing of the band's early efforts, labelling them a "pitiful, lily-livered excuse for a rock'n'roll group" in late-1992. But it was a December '95 news report headlined "Thommy's Temper Tantrum", about the singer's onstage breakdown in Munich, that finally sent Yorke over the edge. He refused to speak to the paper for over five years, protesting that "I'm sure the *NME* don't give a fuck, but what they wrote in that piece hurt me more than anything else anyone has ever written about me."

Ironically, this media freeze-out coincided with Radiohead's most critically adored album to date, 'OK Computer'. Recorded by Nigel Godrich over several painstaking months in various locations, this epochal work finally arrived in June 1997. Laying down a blueprint for 21st century rock, it saw the band transcend conventional pop forms to create a futuristic collage of textured breakbeats, techno-classical symphonies and pre-millennial tension.

After lauding the "ravishingly over-ambitious" six-minute single 'Paranoid Android', *NME* awarded the chart-topping 'OK Computer' a rare-as-platinum 10/10 score, hailing "one of the greatest albums in living memory – and one that distances Radiohead from their peers by an interstellar mile". But when the Number Four single 'No Surprises' arrived in January 1998, *NME* still called it the album's "most self-pitying, miserablist low point" and printed the telephone number of The Samaritans. Cheeky.

'OK Computer' became a worldwide phenomenon, spawning a raft of hits and earning a Mercury Music Prize nomination. But by his own admission Thom, inundated with hysterical acclaim, became an unbearable control freak. "I created a climate of fear, the same way Stalin did," he admitted last year. "I was very paranoid that things would get taken away from me. It was to do with being under massive amounts of pressure. I was so uptight about not getting my own way."

But if 'OK Computer' almost split Radiohead, it also closed their first chapter and allowed them to return to the musical drawing board. The foundations were laid for fresh sounds and more mellow, democratic working methods. By May 2001, Thom was even ready to bury the hatchet with *NME*. "I just got sick of holding grudges basically," he shrugged after finally agreeing to an interview. "Enough's enough."

After a decade of making records, Radiohead probably matter more today than ever

POST-ROCK PROTEST SONGS

Since the new millennium dawned, Radiohead have tempered personal angst with social activism. Although some lyrics on 'OK Computer' had a political dimension, it was not until the late-'90s that Thom began use his celebrity clout to help boost anti-poverty campaigns such as Drop The Debt and Jubilee 2000, picketing the G8 summit and attending May Day marches.

Tapping into a new wave of youthful activism celebrated in Naomi Klein's provocative anti-globalisation handbook *No Logo*, Radiohead toured in 2000 under a big tent free from advertising logos. Klein has since become friendly with the band but says: "My personal influence on Radiohead has been greatly exaggerated. The band had these political ideas long before reading my book, but until a couple of years ago there was less going on politically to tap into."

As their political message sharpened, however, Radiohead's music turned ever more cryptic. Their fourth album, 'Kid A', an artfully avant-garde collage of deconstructed post-rock and electro-ambient tone poems, arrived in October 2000 with no singles and minimal promotion. In a cautiously positive 7/10 review, *NME* noted: "In a desire to quash the rampant air of significance suffusing their every movement and utterance, they've rather sold short the essence of their art."

And yet, despite being seen in some quarters as a self-defeating climbdown from the pressures of success, 'Kid A' topped the charts on both sides of the Atlantic. All of which could be dismissed as a freak act of mass brand loyalty, except that the record's equally challenging sister album 'Amnesiac' was launched to similar success in June 2001. Incorporating jazz, machine noise and a wearily sarcastic attack on Tony Blair, 'Amnesiac' was praised in an 8/10 *NME* review which for its "blinking circuitry and vocal distortions" and "bile that could burn through steel".

Having proved that proved major label chart acts can be both politically outspoken and musically adventurous, Radiohead continue to improvise their own future. Just this year, the band donated a rare video for 'Motion Picture Soundtrack' to the Friends Of The Earth website. As Thom writes on the site: "It's not good enough to preach about the trickle-down effect of economic growth if your house is being washed away, your child has skin cancer, you can't get clean water and the weather is changing beyond recognition forever." Imagine a fuzzy electronic pulse behind those cheery words and you have a fair approximation of Radiohead in the 21st century.

These days Radiohead are a uniquely unpredictable force. They release albums in clusters, record when the mood takes them and tour when they choose rather than chaining themselves to the mega-band treadmill. And for much of the next few weeks, they will be continuing to 'road test' new songs at low-key shows in Spain and Portugal. As ever, plotting their own path on their own terms.

Which is why, even after a decade of making records, Radiohead probably matter more today than ever. Of all their peers, only they have consistently pushed the musical and political agenda, setting high standards for any serious young contenders.

Fellow veterans like Primal Scream may share a similar maverick spirit, while a new generation of post-'Head rockers such as Muse and Coldplay occasionally summon up equally fiery demons. But only Radiohead seem to have developed the capacity for total, passionate, exhilarating self-reinvention. Have you the slightest idea what their next album will sound like? Us neither. Isn't that fantastic?

GET YOUR CLICKS HERE!
FOR EVERYTHING RADIOHEAD, VISIT *NME.COM*'S ARTIST PAGE AT *RADIOHEAD.NME.COM*

AROUND

and 'OK Computer'. An avowed fan of 'Kid A', Chris recently told *NME*: "I like nothing more after a hard day's work than to do loads of coke, meet some local whores and slag off Alan McGee for half an hour before listening to Slipknot and then answering questions about how great Radiohead are and how we should be more like them." But he was possibly being sarcastic.

'HEAD RATING: 6/10

MUSE

Share Radiohead's penchant for cod-classical prog-punk pyrotechnics, recording their 1999 debut 'Showbiz' with former 'Head producer John Leckie. Matt Bellamy also shares Yorke's love of the late Jeff Buckley, saying: "To be that expressive and not be afraid to sing like a woman is amazing."

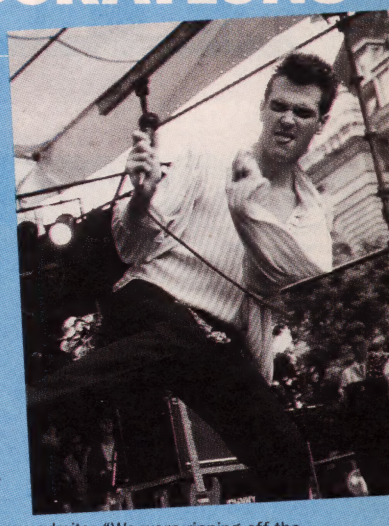
'HEAD RATING: 7/10

STARSAILOR

The latest contenders to squat on Old Radiohead's long-deserted throne as sensitive semi-acoustic balladeers, although James Walsh is clearly far too in awe of the past to follow in Thom Yorke's mind-warping future-soul trajectory.

'HEAD RATING: 5/10

INSPIRATIONS AND COLLABORATIONS



JOY DIVISION

"We used to crash parties in Oxford, put Joy Division on, then leave," says Thom. "The dancefloor would clear."

THE SMITHS

"The Smiths were such an important band for me," says Ed O'Brien, who paid homage to Johnny Marr with 'Knives Out' on 'Amnesiac'.

PIXIES

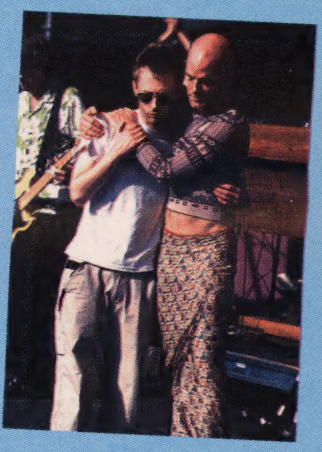
The Boston tune-shredders were early 'Head heroes – they even borrowed their former producers for 'Pablo Honey'. Thom admits: "We were ripping off the Pixies when we started, or trying to and failing."

MIRACLE LEGION

Cultish REM contemporaries from Connecticut. Thom frequently namechecks singer Mark Mulcahy. "It was the voice of someone who was only truly happy when he was singing," the Radiohead frontman said recently. "It changed the way I thought about songs and singing."

REM

Radiohead toured with REM in 1995, and they remain close friends. "I consider Radiohead and Polly Harvey contemporaries," said Michael Stipe recently. "There's a sweet competition between me, Bono and Thom Yorke."



DRUGSTORE

Thom duetted on the Anglo-Brazilian indie band's 1998 single 'El President'.

ROXY MUSIC

Thom and Jonny joined ex-Roxy saxophonist Andy Mackay and former Suede guitarist Bernard Butler on four vintage Roxy covers for the Michael Stipe-produced film *Velvet Goldmine*. Jonny also played on former Roxy frontman Bryan Ferry's 2002 album, 'Frantic'.

SPARKLEHORSE

Collaborating with the fragile alt.country luminaries on a cover of Pink Floyd's 'Wish You Were Here' for a 1997 covers album, Thom sang his vocals down a hotel phone.

DJ SHADOW

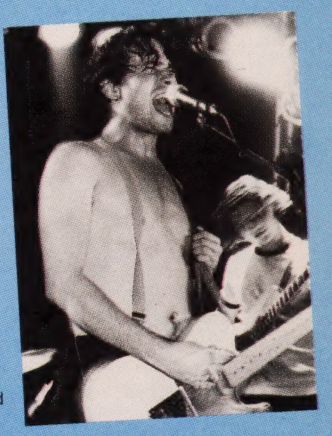
According to Colin Greenwood, "the idea behind 'Paranoid Android' was trying to do a combination of DJ Shadow and The Beatles". Thom sang over Shadow's beats for 'Rabbit In Your Headlights' on the 1998 UNKLE album 'Psyence Fiction' and guested at his recent Bristol gig.

PJ HARVEY

Radiohead toured with Polly in '93, plus Thom duetted on 'This Mess We're In' on her 2000 album 'Stories From The City, Stories From The Sea', and sang backing vocals on two other tracks.

JEFF BUCKLEY

Thom claims the late crooner (right) "gave me the strength to sing in falsetto". 'Fake Plastic Trees' was recorded directly after a Buckley show, in one take. Thom then collapsed in tears.



BJORK

In 2000 Thom guested on 'I've Seen It All' from the Icelandic siren's 'Selmasongs'. A planned duet at the next year's Oscars was cancelled at the last minute.

HUMPHREY LYTTLETON

Veteran jazzer who backed the 'Head on 'Amnesiac' finale 'Life In A Glasshouse'. "It was Humph's drummer, bass player and front three – clarinet, trombone and trumpet," recalls Jonny. "One of them had had a heart operation the day before." Lyttleton's band also guested at Radiohead's South Park mega-show in Oxford last summer.